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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [OEXC](#) [OIIP](#) [PTER](#) [KISL](#) [BA](#) [OFFICIALS](#)
BILAT
SUBJECT: U/S HUGHES, ISLAMIC AFFAIRS MINISTRY DISCUSS
COOPERATION ON SPREADING RELIGIOUS TOLERANCE

Classified By: Ambassador William T. Monroe for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

11. (U) This is an action request; please see para 10.

Summary

12. (C) In a discussion with senior Ministry of Islamic Affairs officials November 1, U/S Hughes sought to elicit ideas for continued cooperation to broaden the reach of the message of religious tolerance and to ensure that terrorists do not become the voice that represents religion in the region. Minister Shaikh Abdulla Bin Khalid Al Khalifa warmly welcomed U/S Hughes, praising the stable relationship between the U.S. and Bahrain, but noted the damage sustained by the U.S.'s reputation in the region due to the war in Iraq and the lack of progress toward peace between Israel and the Palestinians. Undersecretary Dr. Fareed Muftah encouraged the continuation of exchange visits between Bahrain and the U.S. He suggested that a March 2007 training for Bahraini imams and an October 2007 conference on dealing with terrorism-related issues were two venues through which the message of moderation can reach clerics, and then through them to students and the public at large. Dr. Muftah also suggested the publication of a booklet documenting the experiences of Bahraini clerics who have participated on exchange visits so that the wider public can benefit from their experiences. Two exchange visit participants, both Shari'a court judges, discussed their experiences in the United States with U/S Hughes. End summary.

Enhanced U.S./Bahrain Collaboration

13. (C) During a meeting with Minister of Islamic Affairs Shaikh Abdulla Bin Khalid Al Khalifa, Undersecretary Dr. Fareed Muftah, and five senior clerics, two of whom are Shari'a court judges (one Shi'a and one Sunni) who participated in a recent exchange visitor program in the U.S., U/S Hughes sought suggestions on ways to encourage further cooperation between Bahrain and the U.S. to promote mutual religious understanding and tolerance. In welcoming U/S Hughes, Shaikh Abdulla called attention to the long, stable relationship between the U.S. and Bahrain, saying that the relationship remains strong, but noted that the reputation of the U.S. in the region has suffered following the war in Iraq and the lack of concrete progress between the Palestinians and Israelis. Dr. Muftah noted the effectiveness of exchange visits to share experiences with one another and encouraged the continuation of such programs.

¶4. (C) Responding to a further probe by U/S Hughes on how both sides can broaden the reach of the message of moderation and tolerance, Dr. Muftah said that Bahrain had tentatively scheduled a conference for October 2007 that will focus on security issues and how to use religious means to deal with terrorism-related issues. He also highlighted a March 2007 training course for Bahraini imams that will include some trainers from outside Bahrain, and extended an invitation to U/S Hughes to nominate a trainer/teacher from the U.S. to participate in the course. Dr. Muftah said that during a similar course in early 2006, trainers and participants discussed terrorism, civilization, and different Muslim sects living together in peace and cooperation. U/S Hughes applauded the King's role in encouraging inter-sectarian cooperation and the Ministry's role in educating citizens.

¶5. (C) When asked about other means of possible collaboration to ensure that terrorists do not represent religion in the region, Dr. Muftah suggested that the Ministry assemble a booklet of the experiences of those imams who visited the U.S. so that the public will be able to benefit from these visits. He also explained that scholars who participate in Ministry-sponsored clerical training visit schools and prisons, among other places, to spread the word of moderation. In response to a question about the use of the Internet in this public awareness effort, Dr. Muftah stated that the Ministry maintains an updated web site and has a "fatwa hotline" to answer questions from the public about religious fatwas. Regarding how to get moderate voices on to the satellite TV stations, Dr. Muftah said that Shaikh Hameed Al Mubarak and Shaikh Adnan Al Qattan, the Shi'a and Sunni court judges, respectively, who went on an exchange visit to the U.S., appear regularly on television and radio during special religious occasions.

Perceived Needs

¶6. (C) Shaikh Hameed suggested that a particular need was to train clerics how to use common, simple language to communicate the moderate message effectively to popular culture. He added that the government needs to support and encourage journalists to write columns on tolerance and moderation, and that television and radio stations should allow more air time for moderate speakers. He also suggested that universities and schools provide more opportunities for moderate clerics to give lectures for students.

Increase Exchange Visits

¶7. (C) Dr. Muftah again mentioned exchange visitors to Bahrain as a way to reach out to the public. He said that the judges who participated benefited by meeting Americans from various segments of society and returned with positive attitudes toward the U.S. He commented on the effectiveness of press coverage of the recent visit to Bahrain by Syrian-American Imam Mohamed Arafat to reach ordinary Bahrainis with the message of tolerance, moderation and cooperation. Dr. Muftah said that the Ministry had received a letter from the Civilization Exchange and Cooperation Foundation, Imam Arafat's organization, presenting ideas for further contact and collaboration.

¶8. (C) Shaikh Hameed said that in the U.S. he had enjoyed extensive discussions with both official and non-official Americans and was surprised how well he and his traveling companions were received as Arabs even after "events that hurt the relationship between the U.S. and the Arab world." He found the level of freedom of thought, expression, and worship surprising and liberating as he talked with individual Americans who discussed diverse religious ideas freely without any fear.

¶9. (C) Shaikh Adnan also called attention to the benefits of

his visits to both churches and mosques in the U.S. He was struck by the depth of adherence to the fundamental principles of religious freedom and freedom of thought that are part of life in the U.S. Seeking to draw a parallel in Bahrain, he referred to the King's role in encouraging religious cooperation and tolerance in Bahrain, as seen in the peaceful coexistence not only between the Sunni and Shi'a, but also between Muslims, Christians and Jews in Bahrain.

¶10. (U) Action Request: Embassy Public Affairs Section will be in touch with IIP to follow up on the possibility of an American expert participating in the March 2007 training program for Bahraini imams per Dr. Muftah's proposal in para ¶4.

¶11. (U) U/S Hughes cleared this cable.

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